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Fort Ruby: the worst post in the West

In their early stages, most military outposts were desolate places, but some were worse than others. During the seven years it existed, one post in particular was considered by its garrison the epitome of the frontier station at its worst. Fort Ruby, located midway between Salt Lake City, Utah, and Carson City, Nevada, was built in 1862 to protect the Overland Mail route from Paiute raiders. The nearest settlement was 120 miles away. The setting was grim: Colonel P. Edward Connor, the post's first commanding officer, called Ruby Valley

"a bleak, inhospitable place — no forage nor lumber to build with." No lumber, that is, for anything more grand than log cabins (*below*), while horses had to be grazed over a wide area for lack of forage.

A measure of the state of morale at Ruby at the outset was the garrison's desperate offer to forgo a total of \$30,000 back pay if only Washington would order the regiment East to fight in the Civil War. Washington refused. Two years later, a single ray of sunshine graced Ruby when a distillery was built nearby, marketing a

fiery product called "Old Commissary." However much that beverage lifted morale in the ranks, it was simply not enough. When Captain George Walker was given command of Ruby in 1867, his first act was to take six months' furlough.

In 1869, with the construction of the railroad to carry the mail, the Army closed Fort Ruby. This happy action, however, did not come soon enough to avoid a final scandal — the court-martial of Ruby's last commandant, Captain Timothy Connelly, for having embezzled the company funds.

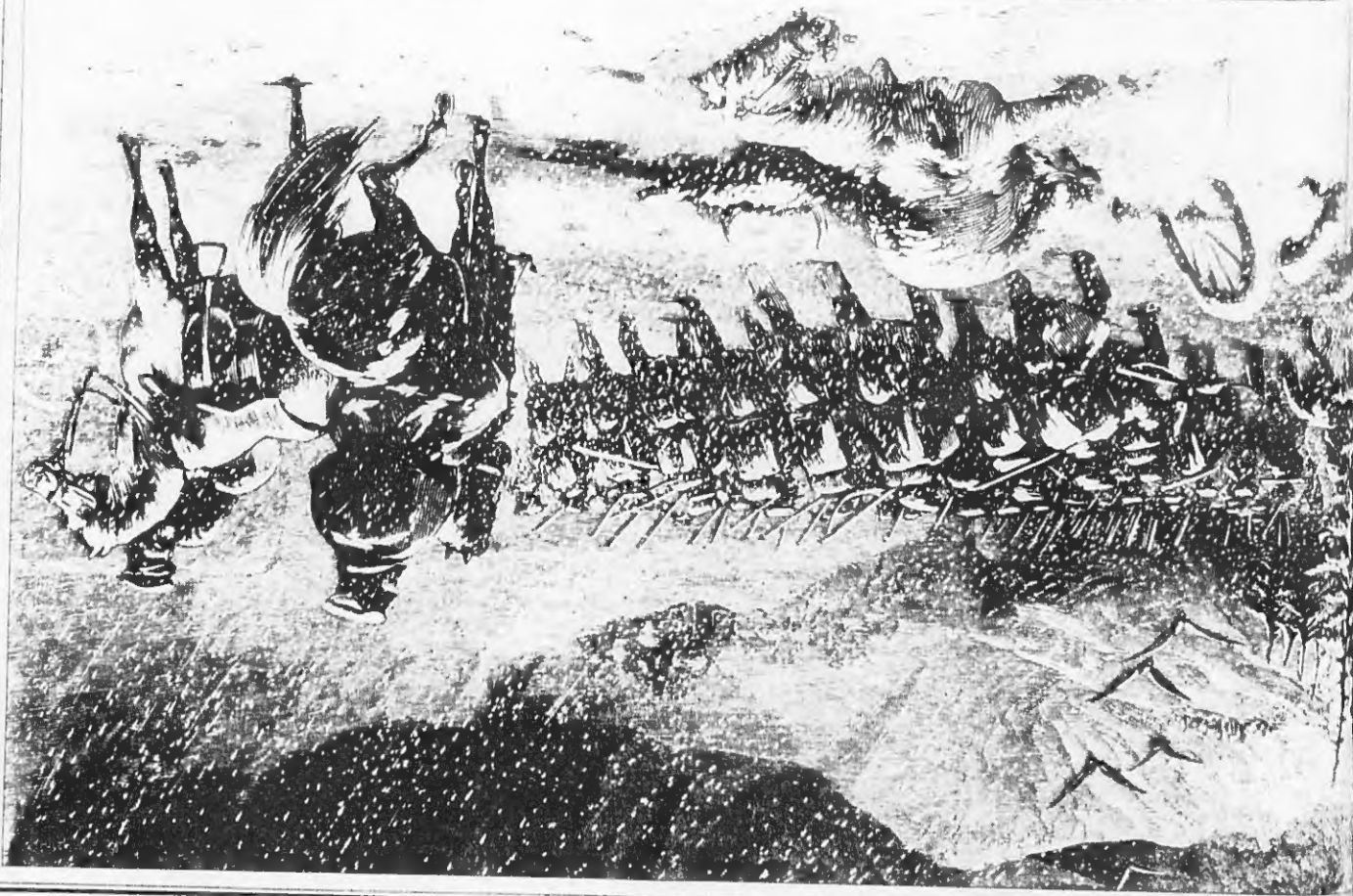
In 1868, Fort Ruby's finest building was the officers' quarters of hewn logs and mud daubing. A year later Ruby was abandoned.



Ruby Valley, Nevada

settler expected them to pay well for the rations the fam-
ished troops bought from his farm.
As the railroads began to push out beyond the fron-
tier, soldiers could ride part of the way toward combat.
But most of their marches were still made the hard
way, by infantrymen on foot and by cavalrymen mount-
ed on horses that had to be curried and tended and
watched over morning and night. Some of these march-
es lasted for weeks, covering hundreds of miles. When
the men came back, they had long hair, ragged beards
and torn clothing. Often the soldiers went out in the
face of blizzards with the wind howling and the tem-
perature below zero; officers sometimes had to whip the
men to keep them awake and thus alive. At other times
the route of march lay through deserts where the tem-

counter, tattered survivors hastened to the nearest Army
post to demand help. The bugle sounded and the men
leaped to horse and rode off in a pursuit that usually be-
came grinding, hungry, thirsty, exhausting ordeal. The
trail might peter out with no Indians even sighted, or it
might end in a sudden battle begun from ambush and
soon finished, with soldiers wounded and dying while
the enemy vanished once more.
Civilians were not at all shy about calling on the
Army for help. Let a man lose so much as a cow and
he was at the nearest post insisting that all the Indians
from here to there be wiped out in retaliation. Many a
disgusted cavalry troop marched for hours seeking In-
dian cow thieves only to find that the cows had merely
strayed. Then, often enough, the soldiers found that the



A blizzard engulfs an Army column sent against the Mormons in 1857. The loss of horses and mules nearly wrecked the expedition.

that could still be gathered by an individual with a pan. Behind them came restless settlers and displaced Southerners looking for a new life. In the sinewy Texas longhorn, cattlemen found a creature that could endure the harsh climate of the Plains, and new equipment such as steel plows made it possible to farm the prairie. The wagon trails were busy, and iron rails reached east and west toward a meeting in Utah.

In such expansive times little thought was given to the fact that the coveted land was already occupied. The trouble that was brewing, that simply had to come when the white man and red man met, was made the worse by the quickness with which it all happened. In 1878 William Tecumseh Sherman, then Commanding General of the Army, wrote in amazement that "this

vast region has undergone in the past ten years a more violent and radical change than any like space of the earth's surface during any previous fifty years."

The soldiers were caught in the middle, bound by duty to enforce the white man's claim to the land, yet unable by their own situations to profit from it. Each of the new people who came — the miner, rancher, farmer, townsman in fresh-sprung hamlets, freighter, rail layer — looked to the soldier to save himself and his family and property from the fury of the Plains Indians, whose livelihood was being snatched away.

The Indians' anger took the form of attacks on isolated ranches, on stage stations, on wagon trains that carried too few riflemen, on railroad gangs cut off from the main bodies of builders. After each desperate en-

Early Western campaigns: The Mormon challenge

Nine years after the Mexican War ended, the Army sent another large force west, this time against a most unlikely enemy: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormons.

During the late 1840s, persecuted and abhorred for their practice of polygamy, the Mormons fled into the wilderness and established the center of a new civilization in the Valley of Great Salt Lake. Through cooperative enterprise and extensive irrigation, they won a handsome living from the arid soil of the region.

Within a decade, the frontier had caught up with them. Now, however, as prior occupants of the land, the Mormons held the strings of power, and they made the most of their advantage. When Utah was made a territory in 1850, their leader, Brigham Young, was named governor. Resisting federal authority at every turn, he administered the territory as a Mor-

mon kingdom. Most unforgivable of all, he undeniably had 27 wives.

Soon after President James Buchanan assumed office in 1857, he decided to replace Young with a non-Mormon governor, Alfred Cumming, a grossly fat former Indian agent. And when the Mormons made it clear that they intended to prevent Cumming from assuming office, the President ordered the Army out. In mid-July, a force of 2,500 soldiers began its departure from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, headed toward Utah to back up Cumming with guns. The march west, covering 1,200 miles and lasting almost four months, became a horror when winter overtook the troops (*right*). Worse, Brigham Young, describing the U.S. government as "a stink in our nostrils," directed his Mormon militia to harass the advancing column by laying waste the countryside, blockading roads and even destroying government supply trains.

These guerrilla tactics were so successful that when the force reached the vicinity of Salt Lake in November it was exhausted.

Not until spring, when fresh supplies and new horses and mules arrived, was the Army in a position to meet the Mormon challenge. But by then a compromise had been arranged. Cumming would enter Salt Lake City and be accepted as governor, but the Army would remain behind. Satisfied with this arrangement, President Buchanan pardoned all insurgents. As tempers cooled, Young agreed to let the Army save face by marching into Salt Lake City — and straight out the other side again.

So, in a magnificent anticlimax and without a shot being fired, the Mormon War came to an end. However, one basic conflict — the practice of polygamy so abhorred by Easterners — remained unsolved. It was finally outlawed by a federal act in 1882.